Unlikely love, rekindled lives

By Judith Maas
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A twice-widowed Jewish woman considers her choices: Should she live with her married son in New Jersey or stay in Florida? A small-town Vermont bachelor contemplates retirement and wonders how he'll spend his time. Out of these commonplace circumstances, Deborah Lee Luskin weaves together an enchanting tale of solitude, friendship and romance in her novel, "Into the Wilderness."

The story is set in 1964. Rose Mayer is an immigrant, a New Yorker, a seamstress and a fierce Democrat. Percy Merritt is a farming expert, a taciturn Yankee and a staunch Republican. Their paths cross when Rose decides to spend the summer with her son and his family at their vacation home in Vermont. Elections are coming up in the fall, everybody is talking politics and the early encounters between Rose and Percy are filled with friction. On topics like the merits of the New Deal, the two can find no common ground, but the liveliness of their exchanges suggest an underlying attraction.

At summer's end, Rose chooses to stay in Vermont and live in the house on her own, to the consternation of her son. Suddenly she seems unwilling to settle into routines supposedly befitting a woman of her age: minding the grandchildren, chanting with her Florida friends. And how will she manage through the winter? Rose's decision presages a relationship with Percy and much of the novel's charm comes from the to-and-fro of their courtship and their attempts to bridge their differences.

Luskin takes her time in developing the relationship between Rose and Percy; the novel thus becomes much more than a light, pleasing story of an unlikely pairing. Its poignancy arises from Luskin's portrayal of these characters in all their depth and fullness. Through flashbacks, we see their struggles at various turning points in their lives. We learn what stirs their longings and touches their souls, now that they are in their mid-50s. And along the way, Luskin offers sometimes surprising depictions of aging and its challenges.

What Rose and Percy have in common proves even more compelling than what divides them. Both are newly alone and disoriented: Rose has lost her second husband; Percy's sister has died, and his only real romance has been with a woman who died many years before. Both have time on their hands—time to spend alone with their thoughts, scouring memories, noticing details in their surroundings, wondering what lies ahead.

Describing their uneventful days of errands and housekeeping, Luskin mines the unexpected riches that can arise from quiet and solitude. Overcome by the silence and emptiness of his house, Percy begins playing a few notes on the piano and becomes stunned by the rush of emotion that this simple action brings: "He shifted his left hand to a new chord that made him want to weep, it was so sad...He was becoming the music." Spending time by herself, Rose is given to reverie-long-buried sensations rise to the surface—she recalls the first time she heard a chamber quartet performance and how it "pulled the strings of her heart so taut that she lost her breath and had to loosen the collar of her blouse."

As they leave behind long-familiar roles and responsibilities, Percy and Rose's desires and hopes intensify. Like young people just starting out, they must figure out where they belong—how to create a home, find community, enjoy their own company. When a romance finally blossoms, born out of their love of music, it seems just right; the emotions portrayed are honest and believable, with no straining for effect: "Who were Percy's people? He had none. Rose was his comfort." "This kind man. She patted his shoulder and he took her hand, and her heart raced...It felt so good to be held."

Yet another strength of the novel is Luskin's ability to show her characters in relation to setting—Rose as a young woman in the city, working in a factory going out dancing, standing in line to hear classical music; Percy taking part in town celebrations and stylishly playing the piano for a group of friends, both of them attuned to the landscape and changing seasons of Vermont. Within their worlds, Rose and Percy are seekers and explorers. What finally matters most about them is not their age, but their receptiveness to renewal and possibility.